

Constructing the Black-Self in Langston Hughes's Poetry

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Abstract:

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is brave a poet to confront the reality of being a colored and segregated subject in the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century. Apart from being the poet of the people, Hughes widely celebrates the beauty of his people, voicing their social and economic problems and asserting their racial identity as an integral part of the American cultural confluence. This paper explores the profound artistic endeavor Hughes made to provide psychological and moral uplift to his people in an attempt to construct the Black Self in the eyes of black people themselves and white Americans as well. It deals with particular cultural codes Hughes foregrounds in his poetry to the black readers, drawn heavily from concepts as blackness, primitivism, and Negritude to create a racial consciousness and rehabilitate the entire race.

Keywords: (The Black- Self, Blackness, Primitivism, Negritude, Race Pride, Racial Consciousness).

بناء الذات السوداء في شعر لانغستون هيوز

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الملخص:

يعدّ لانغستون هيوز (١٩٠٢-١٩٦٧) شاعراً شجاعاً واجه مرارة التمييز العنصري في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية في العقود الأولى من القرن العشرين. وبعيداً عن كونه " شاعر الناس"، فإن هيوز كثيراً ما يحتفل بجمال أبناء عرقه، معبراً عن همومهم ومشاكلهم الاقتصادية والاجتماعية، مدافعاً عن هويتهم العرقية كجزء أساس من المكون الحضاري الأمريكي. يتناول هذا البحث الجهد العميق الذي بذله لانغستون هيوز في النهوض بأبناء البشرة السوداء بمختلف المستويات: النفسية منها والاخلاقية من خلال بناء " النفس السمراء" في عين الزنجي أولاً، وفي أعين

الأمريكيين البيض ثانياً. يتصدى البحث إلى مجموعة من الأنظمة والمفاهيم الحضارية التي يحاول هيوز تقديمها للقراء السود، تجذبه قوة تجاه بعض المفاهيم الحساسة مثل البدائية، واللون الأسود، وحركة السود في أوربا مطلع القرن العشرين Negritude لخلق وعياً عرقياً جمعياً يساعد على ترميم العنصر الاسود بالكامل وبنائه.

الكلمات المفتاحية: (الذات السوداء، السود، البدائية، الزواج، الفخر العنصري، الوعي العنصري).

1. Introduction

So I am ashamed for the black poet who says, "I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet", as though his own racial world were not as interesting as any other world. I am ashamed, too, for the colored artist who runs from the painting of Negro faces to the painting of the sunset... because he fears the strange un-whiteness of his own features.

(Hughes, 1994, p. 95).

The African American community has long been subjected to different forms of humiliation in America. Consequently, artists of African descent intensely disliked their dark skin. In the statement above, Langston Hughes reflects on the desire of a young black poet who shies away from the skin color of his own. Quoting a particular black poet, Hughes intends to tackle a psychological condition that presents a severe problem of the black artists of the 20th century and the entire black race. Because of the cultural hegemony of the white race and the dominance of white artistic conventions, several black artists consistently attempt to dissociate themselves from their own racial identity. Thus, many black poets, Countee Cullen for instance, attempt to write universal themes with a high degree of accuracy, absent-mindedly leaving their racial crisis behind. Undoubtedly, Hughes and some other Harlem Renaissance artists and intellectuals never desired to be white, and stood as advocacies and interpreters of their people (Rampersad, 2008).

During the Harlem Renaissance of the twentieth century, African American artists and intellectuals are divided over the representation of the black people in the literary text. Some intellectuals emphasize the significance of art as a medium of expression and

the artist's role as an interpreter of his community. According to them, it is the responsibility of the artist to create a racial identity consisting of shared characteristics among people of color. W.B.E. Du Bois and Alain Locke were the foremost black intellectuals during the Harlem Renaissance. They share a common purpose in advocating for the black race and creating a positive image of black people through the medium of art during the 20th-century Negro Movement. In his essay, "Criteria of Negro Art," Du Bois (2021) stresses, "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be... (p. 259). According to him, black artists in the United States must be responsible for creating and projecting beauty to the world, representing their racial group. To accomplish this significant task, black artists must employ the techniques and ways used by classical artists of the past. Initially, classical writers utilized the truth to gain a comprehensive understanding of the world. They employed truth not for the sake of the truth itself but as someone who sees truth as a tool to serve his muse. Moreover, artists have drawn on the notion of goodness, which includes honor, justice, and righteousness, not as a means of ethical approval but as an efficient way to elicit and captivate human interest (Bois, 2021). In addition, Du Bois (2007), proceeding Hughes, recognizes the psychologically damaged black selves of the Negro artists, addressing them directly in his collected essays entitled, *The Soul of Black Folk*. He is the first to propose the concept of Double Consciousness, which refers to the psychological ambivalence black artists feel in America. Therefore, he had already discerned the spiritual fragmentation within his racial group and the need for a moral and psychological uplift. As he puts it, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever felt his two-ness, two reconciled striving; two warring ideas in one dark body" (Bois, p. 8).

Alain Locke, an African American intellectual and advocate for social change, found himself in a similar position as Bois when it comes to recognizing the damaged Selves of Black people and the racial plight African American artists were grappling with. For him, this issue arose from a long-time system of racial segregation and stereotypes under the total dominance of white society. As a result, the ill-treatment gave the black artists a strong sense of inferiority that made them dissociate themselves from their race. As he notices, "so for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being_ a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down"... a social bogey or a social burden" (Locke, 1994, p.21). However, in analyzing the psychological state

of young black artists, Locke believes that those young artists experience a collective sense of inferiority because they see themselves in the same stereotyped and distorted images constructed by popular culture. To liberate themselves from the unfair generalization imposed by their oppressor, black artists had to acknowledge the false perception held by white society. Therefore, the black artist must confront such stereotypes, projecting a positive image of black people. For Locke, it is the responsibility of the artists to rehabilitate the whole race through constructing the black self and challenging established stereotypes of racialized America (Locke, 1994). In this sense, the primary objective of the Harlem Renaissance authors is to assert control over the representation of black individuals, rejecting externally imposed classifications. According to them, stereotypes not only mirror but also perpetuate oppression, so the endeavor to fight these white constructions possesses symbolic effectiveness. Such manifesto articulates the project to establish an artistic identity for African Americans as both esteemed subjects and talented creators of art (Feith, 2001).

As the debate over the literary representation of black folk became more intense, George Schuyler, a young black poet, expresses a controversial opinion against the authenticity of black literature. In his (1994) essay, "The Negro Art Hokum", Schuyler presented a crucial stance towards the whole project of black art. Mocking the originality of black art, Schuyler argues that literature, painting, and sculpture created by black people are essentially the same as that of white Americans, showing a varying degree of European influence. According to him, there is no specific art that can be classified as "Negro Art" but rather merely American art (p. 52). However, finding himself in the same position as Du Bois and Alain Locke in defending and constructing the Black Self, Hughes made a quick response in the same year of 1926; he publishes his most influential essay, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In his essay, Hughes stresses the authenticity of black art and urges black artists to be true to themselves when representing their race. Moreover, he encourages young artists to embrace their racial identity; in an attempt to provide them with moral and psychological uplift, "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, does not matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly, too" (Hughes, 1994, 95).

Despite its being a spontaneous flow of artistic expressions, Hughes, along with certain authors, soon converged on the idea that constructing the black self lies at the heart of The Harlem Renaissance. The main goal was twofold: to challenge the negative image of black people and project a new racial identity onto the world by constructing the Black Self from within. The authors of the Harlem Renaissance like Claude Mckay, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas and Langston Hughes challenge the established stereotypes and false ideas about the black race created by popular culture many years ago. Therefore, they seek to create a positive image of the black educated man of the 20th century, which is supposed to be the total opposite of the previous image of the slave Negroes of the past. In order to create a racial consciousness, black artists approached their history and folk culture, searching for a personal identity of their race. In doing so, their quest may help obtain equal rights and refute the discrimination and segregation that they grappled with for many years. At the heart of this task lies the role of the art and artists. (Ahlin, 2009).

Langston Hughes is the most influential African American poet in the early decades of the 20th century. He is prolific writer, who does not limit himself to one genre. Hughes's literary genius is to encompass a wide range of literary expressions such as poetry, short stories, novels, children's writings, and translations. His extensive body of work helped bridge the gap between the older and younger generations of black artists and the black diaspora living in different parts of the world beyond the United States. Working with literary Jazz, Blues, and lyrical forms, Hughes's innovative attitude demonstrates dignity and an intense pride in his race. Furthermore, his preoccupation with the lives of the black middle class made him the mouthpiece and the poet for the poor people rather than the privileged elite during the Harlem Renaissance (Miller, 2004). Because of his approach to folk culture, making the middle class experience his prevailing themes and subject matters, Hughes becomes the representative voice of whole communities of African descent around the world. As he explores a fuller range of Negro experiences, Hughes's poetry emphasizes the complex nature of black people, portraying them as fully human beings and equal citizens of the United States (Sanders, 2007).

Hughes's project of constructing the Black Self starts early in his life and continued until he died in the sixties. He made his literary debut in 1921, when his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," appears in *The Crisis*, a magazine edited

by Du Bois. The population of the poem establishes Hughes as a poet, taking a high seat among the black artists of The Harlem Renaissance. After publishing several race poems while in Harlem, Hughes decides to tour the country, reading poetry for black people. In the fall of 1930, Hughes starts a trip to the South, reading his poetry throughout the region. After meeting students at black colleges, Hughes's commitment to aesthetics and racial equality is vastly deepened. Touring several parts of the South, the black audience adore the young poet and overflow to attend his readings. To stimulate his audience, Hughes read one night, "The Negro Mother," where the narrator, in a dramatic monologue, teaches her children to convert the darkness of the past into light through spiritual inspiration and endurance. Although his initial aim of touring the South and reading out his poetry is gaining money, Hughes finds the idea is constructive for the race, and continues his touring even out of the United States, supported by many black and white intellectuals (Miller, 2004).

According Hughes, the concepts of self-expression and embracing one's cultural heritage found in Negro honest literature, as the common black people could serve a genuine material for Negro artists through their innate rhythm and spirituals. The divergence between Langston Hughes and other Harlem Renaissance intellectuals is Hughes's deep concern in the truthful depiction of the low and middle-class African American lives. While most of the thinkers stress the use of universal themes and white conventions in black arts, Hughes believes in the faithful depiction of the personal experience of his race, seeking inner beauty in their primitive elements and humanity, and unifying them under shared roots and origins. He writes poems intentionally dealing with prostitution like "Red Silk Stocking" and "Ruby Brown". Other black social issues that Hughes presents unabashedly like losing virginity, ghetto life, and cheap cabaret nights are an authentic expression of the race. Such poems may not appeal to the Boisian concept of "Art as Propaganda"; they may also reinforce white construction of the African descendant's attitude. For Hughes, on the contrary, the truthful depiction and unashamed expression of one's experience legitimize the race and unite black culture in one authentic body.

Devoted to his racial group, Hughes's poetic career falls into three distinct areas. The initial focus of his work revolves around themes of isolation, despair, and suicide—typical subjects for a young poet. However, these concepts were deeply personal for Hughes as he grappled with the repercussions of his father's abandonment

and his mother's erratic relationship with him. The poem "Suicide's Note," demonstrates this style. The second domain, consistently evident since the inception of Hughes's career as a poet and fiction writer, highlights a fervent socialist, non-racial intellect, exemplified by the titles of two poems composed later, in 1932: "Good Morning Revolution" and "Goodbye Christ." The third domain for which Hughes is predominantly recognized involves his direct response to the concerns of African Americans, shown by "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published in 1921. Hughes's uniqueness as a poet stems from his contributions in this last racial context. In his poems concerning race, one observes distinctly defined subgroups once more. Certain poems explore the societal conditions of Black individuals; others assertively celebrate the beauty and dignity of the race, while some—arguably the most esteemed—transcend both vehement protest and assertive assertion to proclaim the dignity and historical significance of Black people subtly. Hughes' primary objective is to rehabilitate the wounded spirits of his community by evoking their profound history and intrinsic beauty (Rampersad, 2008). His most celebrated poems, such as "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "The Negro," "Me and My Song," "I, Too," "Mother to Son," "The Negro Mother," "My People," and "Note on Commercial Theatre" primarily belong to this category.

2. Constructing the Black-Self in Some Selected Poems

Langston Hughes believes that one of the aims of black writers is to write about their people in a troubled and unjust world. However, in the United States, the Negro writer has a deeply rooted dilemma while writing. Despite satisfying himself, the black author has two more opposite audiences: one is white, and the other is black. Some writers who feel they must cross the fence of color that separates between those two different audiences have to adopt an ambivalent personality to please both white and black audiences. For Hughes, the best black writers are those who do not care about straddling the fence, embracing nothing but an artistic truth to represent their people (Hughes, 2001):

As to Negro writing and writers, one of our aims, it seems to me, should be to gather the strengths of our people in Africa and the Americas into a tapestry of words as strong as the bronzes of Benin, the memories of Songhay and Mele, the war cry of Chaka, the beat of the blues, and the Uhuru of African freedom, and give it to the world with pride and love. (Hughes, 2001, p. 478)

Preoccupied with his people, Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) opens with a poem entitled "Proem," which serves as a prologue, where he states his central theme of pride expressed through the black poetic voice:

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa. (Hughes, 2015, p.1)

Using dramatic monologue, "Proem" states the sense of place and historicity and converts the suffering of the dark-skinned people into race pride. Made up of six paralleled stanzas, the first stanza takes Hughes's identification with his people and their origins. Far from lamentable self-loathing, the speaker asserts the dark complexion as a separate racial group. In the first line, Hughes poses pride as a genuine statement. In contrast, the second and third lines emphasize the statement with deeper explanations, asserting the color fence through an elaborate simile, with a calm and proud tone and a strong sense of belonging. As a physical and imaginary place, Africa stands for both a spiritual sentiment and a prime for a long journey of mobility in the second stanza.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his doorsteps dean.

I brushed the boots of Washington. (Hughes, 2015, p.1)

After affirming his racial identity, the speaker quickly extends the poem's world in time and place with four analogous stanzas. He narrates the complex experience that African descents faced throughout history, invoking familiar places and people of direct subjection to the race. The reader travels throughout ancient times and places, shifting focus from ancient Rome, Egypt, Africa, and the United States. The subjective black persona "I am" urges the reader to trace the origins of the "sorrow song and "ragtime" from the abyss of ages in Africa to the modern cities in different parts of the world. Surprisingly, through the poem's cadence and syntax, the variety of locations of the black culture enhances the speaker's pride and affirms his racial identity (Hogan , 2008).

I've been a worker:

Under my hands the pyramids arose.

I made mortar for the Woolworth Building. (Hughes, 2015, p.1)

The next stanza is devoted to spirituality and songs of the black race. As sorrow is considered a universal concept, encompassing the entire humankind, the poet regains the Black Self's humanity by associating it with the sorrow songs. Moreover, because black culture is always associated with passion and rhythm, several types of twentieth century American music like Jazz, Blues and ragtime believed to be originally coming from the African descents:

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia

I carried my sorrow songs. I made ragtime.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

They lynch me now in Texas. (Hughes, 2015, p.1)

Hughes successfully constructed a new sense of place by invoking various geographical locations, Africa, Georgia, Belgium and America, sharing a sense of pride ranging from the individual subject to the global community. Referring to the origins and roots of black culture, he delves deep into these diverse origins. He thoroughly directs his intention into local and international locations, rural and urban, as well as actual and imaginary. Such places, it is clear, provoke black readers that those places stand for a long history of oppression and discrimination kept into the psyche of African descent. However, Hughes reminds the whole race of their being essential contributors to these civilizations; without the contribution of the black culture the world would have no such human prevailing. Therefore, Hughes's first collection opens with a definite map of race geography, reinforcing shared experience of the black race across variety of cultures (Hogan, 2008).

The last stanza is a repetition of the first one wherein Hughes emphasizes pride and beauty of his race. For him, Africa is the holy mother, the origin of their spirituals and natural beauty. Identified his black color with the depth of Africa, the speaker metaphorically refers to the fertility of the black soul that coming out the fertile "Mother Africa":

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,

Black like the depths of my Africa. (Hughes, 2015, p.1)

Interestingly, Hughes had a firsthand experience of the Dark Continent. Therefore, what white Europeans perceived as savage and evil, Hughes made meaningful and beautiful, creating symbolic oppositions such as dark and beautiful

people, wild and lovely land, black and kind night. Because of his African origin, Chinitz (2008) noticed that Hughes's comprehension of the twentieth century primitivism is constructive rather than the solely destructive perspective held by white modernist writers. Therefore, Hughes prioritized the aesthetic of his race in nature above everything else. He returns to primitivism through repeated imagery in his poetry. He consistently expressed his nostalgia for the primitive aspects of his origins in many poems (p. 62). For instance, in his "Lament for Dark Peoples", Hughes (2015) states:

They drove me out of my forest
They took me away from my jungles
I lost my trees
I lost my silver moon. (p. 82).

In a short poem entitled "My People," in *The Collected Poems* (1995), originally appeared in *The Weary Blues*, under the title "Poem", we view the poem through the perspective of a black narrator, who speaks of his race in three paralleled stanzas. Using a collective metaphor of nature and cosmology, the speaker foregrounds the beauty of his race through nature and the universe:

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.
Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (Hughes, 1995, p.36).

As the diversity of deity and worship insists, spirituality is rooted in African cultural traditions. Royster (1974) noticed that man is considered a spiritual being rather than a physical body in African traditions because nature is a prime mover of the universe. In this sense, Langston Hughes conceived black as natural, fair, and part of the light, and the soul lies at the center of that immense blackness (p. 76). In a simple, paralleled syntax and deep symbolism, the speaker likens his people successfully to the beautiful night, beautiful stars, and beautiful sun.

The speaker of "My People" converts the ordinary symbolism of night from being a symbol of evil, death, and ignorance to a symbol of beauty and peacefulness, associating ironically the faces of his people with the beauty of the night. Within the symbology traditions, like water, night stands for potentiality and fertility because it

promises daylight (Cirlot, 2001). In the same poetic cadence and elaborate simile, the second stanza moves from the night to the stars that stands for the life's spirituality and vastness of the universe. As the stars appear in clusters, Hughes likens the eyes of his people to the stars in the sky as they were spread in different parts of the world. The last stanza steps into the center of that immense vast universe, likening the black soul to the sun. Since the sun, a natural force central to cultural traditions, stands for confidence and energy. For Hughes, like sorrow, beauty is a universal concept of nature incarnate associated with the beauty of his race. Linking physical images of beauty directly to his people as beautiful and dignified, Hughes once again attempts to construct the black self, emphasizing its universality.

In an essay entitled "Roots, Routes, and Langston Hughes's Hybrid Sense of Place", William Hogan (2008) argues that Hughes reimagines African American culture and place (Africa), invoking particular landscapes like rivers, night, sun, mountains, and earth to unite communities and create a kind of rootedness, aiming to strength the African American communities:

If Yeats's understanding of Irish landscapes, for example, was conditioned by the broader rise in European nationalist movements, and if Moore's sense of place responds to the changing status of wilderness in an industrializing America, then Hughes's mapping of the routes of African American culture imagines a new meaning of "rootedness" that proposes to strengthen communities even across physical separation (p. 185).

Clearly, Hughes's project to construct the Black Self through his poetic voice is akin to the project of Negritude as a cultural movement established at the turn of the century. As a cultural movement, Negritude has exerted a significant influence throughout Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas. While the white culture often depicted black Africans as primitive and depraved, devoid of any significant culture, the central aim held by Negritude was to unite black descendants from various nations through their shared heritage and common origins. Racist discourse has often used the concept of blackness as the definitive symbol of the racial degeneration of black Africans. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a prevalent belief across Europe posited that the world's population was hierarchally categorized by race according to skin color, with white Europeans seen as the most civilized and black

Africans the most barbaric and out of civilization. Therefore, Negritude sought to reclaim blackness from its established negative connotations. As a result, blackness was redefined as a suitable valued entity, enabling black people worldwide to unify as a cohesive and constructed body (McLeod, 2000).

Moreover, he noticed that celebrating blackness is central to Negritude as an anti-stereotypical movement. Blackness includes far more than skin color; it signifies a comprehensive way of life rooted in perceived distinct qualities (p. 78). Embracing Negritude as a counter-resistance Movement, Hughes celebrates blackness according to his understanding. Instead of evoking evil as a common symbol of black night, Hughes's blackness invokes positive meanings such as beauty, gentleness, and kindness. For Hughes, celebrating blackness is an attempt to regain a sense of dignity of African culture, resulting in the construction of the Black Self after being shattered by the established false construction of white culture. While the Western culture viewed the black culture as "backward" and primitive, Hughes challenges white representations, and converts black primitive and natural elements into positive and distinct characteristics.

In interior monologue, "Me and My Song" celebrates the African origins, and demonstrates Negritude as a central theme. First published in *Jim Crow's Last Stand* (1943), and later in *The Collected Poems* (1995), the speaker of the poem embraces his skin color, taking pride in his Idealized Africa. The poem consists of an analogous system of metaphor, associating the speaker's Black Self with his cultural origins:

Black
As the gentle night
Black
As the kind and quiet night
Black
As the deep productive earth
Body
Out of Africa. (Hughes, 1995,p.296).

In the above lines, Hughes visualizes Africa in the physical world to provide legitimate continuity and connections among the black selves. The presence of the "productive earth", "gentle night", and the "black color" reinforces his themes of pride and beauty of black culture by invoking universal symbols such as the earth, a symbol

of motherhood and fertility, and Africa, the symbol of roots and nationalism. Reconnecting place and culture, the poet highlights a new sense of racial identity, a concept they long suffered from feeling and asserting in the face of white culture. For Hughes, as for Negritude, by creating identity, the Black Selves unified.

“Me and My Song” is built on the assumption that the Black Everyone is as natural as life itself. As the song and the singer are both coming out of Africa, life force is coming out of Africa, too. By likening the innate qualities of beauty, strength, fertility and naturalness to the Idealized Africa, the speaker glorifies his racial group with an open pride. The association of beauty with night, and by extension with blackness, is reinforced by nature as a symbol of motherhood. The ancient civilizations of Greece and Latin, and even in modern English, refer to Gaia (Earth) as mother personification, for both terms “nature” and “earth” are referred to as feminine in gender (Ferber, 2007). In addition, Chinitz (2008) noticed that, “Hughes’s black working class are “natural” types, uncorrupted by the dehumanizing and falsifying forces of industrial capitalism. They may not be primitives per se, but they are still a race apart; their differences from the “civilized” Westerner remain essential” (p. 67):

Strong and black
As iron
First smelted in
Africa
Song
Out of Africa
Deep and mellow song
Rich
As the black earth
Strong
As the black iron
Kind
As the black night
My song
From the dark lips
Of Africa. (Hughes, 1995, p. 296-97).

With a deep interest in the African American music, Hughes's "sorrow songs" reappear in the form of "Deep and mellow song" in "Me and My Song" to demonstrate the aesthetics and universality of black culture. In the nineteenth century, American popular music was transformed because of the growing interest in the Negro harvest songs and spirituals, which gradually entered the public arena through the recently developing minstrel stage. The spirituals, jubilee songs, work songs, melodies, and subsequently, ballads, were frequently noted and praised by white observers for their peculiar yet poignant beauty (Tracy, 2004). In his article, "Songs Called the Blues" (2001), Hughes stresses the significant role played by American music coming out of African origins, "The Blues and the Spirituals are two great Negro gifts to American music" (p. 213). Hughes, once more emphasizes the idea of universality of black self, using songs and spirituals. The song, "From the dark lip", refers not only to the African American music of Jazz and Blues, but it also symbolizes the deep seated spirituals of the race, asserting the undoubted universality of the Black Self and its source of humanity:

Deep as the rich earth
Beautiful
As the black night
Strong
As the first iron
Black
Out of Africa
Me and my
Song. (Hughes, 1995, p. 297).

In a direct simile and simple syntax, Hughes associates both the black self and its song with the sources of life and strength like earth, night, and iron. The collective black persona is unified with concrete images out of Africa in a pastoral manner. While the night stands for aesthetic pleasure, the earth is productive and fertile.

Another poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," appeared in *The Crisis* (1921), and later in *The Weary Blue* (1926); Hughes demonstrates pride and universality of the Black Self, seen through the history of the race. Using the same collective black persona, he addresses white and black audiences and reminds them of the cultural richness of the black race across history. Hughes invokes the historical function of the

four principal rivers in the world and their relationship to the race, including the Congo, Euphrates, the Nile, and the Mississippi River. As is the case with the previous poems, the pronoun “I” in “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a two-edged sword. The former is the allegorical figure who represents all black people addressing the white audience, and the latter is the poet’s voice that speaks to his people. The poem falls into the lyrical formula, consisting of thirteen lines and five stanzas; they all work collectively to deliver the poet’s pride of race and cultural richness. In the opening line, the speaker associates the history of rivers with the history of the black race. Using the present perfect tense to invoke the idea that the past can be carried over into the present, the speaker quickly establishes a quick acquaintance with rivers:

I’ve known rivers:

I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. (Hughes, 2015, p. 33).

The lines above not only reinforce the association of black race with the rivers, but also elucidates their nature, “ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.” The speaker states that the black race, acquainted with ancient rivers, is as old as existence itself. In this context, Hughes challenges white scientists of the nineteenth century who have stripped Africans of their cultural heritage and historical identity, and at the same time reassures his people of their extensive history as feeling of inferiority victimized Black Selves.

To convey his statements clearly, Hughes drew heavily from diverse literary devices such as imagery, metaphor, repetition, and symbolism. Rivers invoke a powerful symbolic meaning in the poem. As a common symbolism, rivers stand for fertility and prosperity. Nonetheless, the symbolic significance of rivers extends to a more extensive range of meaning in life. In his *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Ferber (2007) notices that rivers stand for evolving spiritual life and for a nation's life or spiritual history. Moreover, he added that the journey of a river, from its source to its mouth, is an analogy to the journey of human life from birth to death (p. 172). In this sense, Hughes highlights the long journey and spiritual history of the black self, which is as ancient as great ancient rivers.

Hughes moves from the general to the specific symbolism when he shifts from rivers to water metaphor in the second stanza, which consists of one single line, by

using the adjective "deep," "My soul has grown deep like the rivers." He likens the deep rivers to the soul of his people, as he offers an elaborate simile, sharing the same symbolic significance. Water's quality of transparency and depth stands for two profound symbolic meanings. In some cultural traditions, water stands for the inherent wisdom of man. The prehistoric cultures believed that the abyss of water stands for the mysterious source of wisdom. The Mesopotamian people also considered the abyss of water as unfathomable wisdom, while in the Irish ancient beliefs, a god named Domnu represented 'marine depth. Other symbolic significance, appeared in hermetic tradition, is that water symbolizes a prime matter of creation; it existed first on the earth. The deity Nu is the primordial substance from which the gods of the first ennead sprang. The Chinese see water as the designated dwelling of the dragon, as all life originates from the waters. In the Vedas, water is designated as *mâtritâmâh* (the most maternal) due to the primordial state resembling a sea devoid of light. In India, this element is commonly perceived as the sustainer of life, permeating everything of nature, such as rain, sap, milk, and blood. Therefore, all liquid matter and all solid bodies are in the process of being and becoming found in the image of water, including the fluid body of man, which suggests that water denotes the universal infinite possibility that exists and proceeds all forms of creation (Cirlot, 2001). Using water and river imagery as universal symbols for existence associated with black people, Hughes provide psychological and spiritual relief for his race in lyrical form.

Influenced by Walt Whitman, Hughes's style varied within the same poem. He changes the number of lines in the stanza, breaking the lines accordingly, and never stick to length of lines. While the second stanza consists of one line, the third stanza consists of four lines, varied in length. As the poem progresses, Hughes utilizes the distinct qualities of lyrical poetry to allow himself to travel imaginatively in time and space, capturing a wide range of human experiences since the early dawn of civilizations. Thus, the third stanza expresses the permanent memory and human existence, moving quickly from one place to another with no limits of the genre. In lyrical poetry, sequential time is an illusion; therefore, it involves poetic emotions only outside time limits and expresses itself in a vast, unlimited universe. It also frees itself from causation and logical analysis since it rejects narration as a form of expression. While dramatic action moves on throughout time, the lyrical poem stands still, and instead of developing such action, like in other literary genres such as novels or drama, the lyric highlights and evolves human emotional response (Miller, 2006). Considering such qualities, Hughes mentions four ancient rivers according to their historical and

cultural significance, signifying four major civilizations of human history akin to the history of black race. In a profound use of metaphor, Hughes associates the history of black man with the history of these four major rivers:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (Hughes, 2015, p. 33).

The speaker begins with the Euphrates River, which represents Mesopotamian civilization, the earliest civilization on Earth. He is proud that his race "bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young," as we can substitute the pronoun "I" with the collective black persona "we" in most of Hughes' poems. Then, he moves on to the second culturally important river with a significant symbolic meaning. "I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep." as bathing is combined with the image of sleep, it seems the Congo River is lulling and guarding a child's sleep, symbolizing rebirth. The speaker in the third line of the third stanza includes Egypt in the traditions of the black man, claiming that ancient Egypt is part of the heritage of the black race: "I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it." The collective, allegorical "I" represents pride and timeless resilience of the spirit of their racial consciousness, akin to a river whose perpetual essence consists of countless individual droplets. The term Hamito-Semitic usually refers to the confluence of Egyptian people and their ancient civilization, which denotes a blend of Mediterranean and African influences. At the same time, the governmental structure is influenced by the initial city-state of Mesopotamia. By including the Egyptian civilization as part of his cultural heritage, Hughes broadened the reader's perspective to express humankind's collective heritage and proudly stressed that the black man was part of that human experience. Consequently, since it contributed to the ethos of black culture, the Egyptian civilization appeared to be a positive relief, enhanced the pride of the black race in the poetry of Langston Hughes (Feith, 2001).

After narrating the experience of the black race in sequence through history of rivers, the speaker moves on from ancient times and civilizations into modern American history in the nineteenth century:

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln
went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy
bosom turn all golden in the sunset. (Hughes, 2015, p. 33).

As the last line of the third stanza differs in length and connotations, Hughes brings the reader closer to his pervading theme of race. Employing the lyrical qualities of the poem, he moves quickly in time and space. The poet intentionally invokes Abraham Lincoln to evoke the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, which marks the end of slavery in the United States. Moreover, the changing color of the Mississippi's water may refer brilliantly into changing the destiny of black people from slavery into freedom.

Thus, the speaker skillfully retraces the ancient civilizations back to the eastern Africa through the representations of rivers. Through lyrical structure, the reader reimagines himself into aboriginal consciousness. The poet asserts that the Black -Self distilled from the history of humanity emerging from the ancient time through the nineteenth century to the Harlem Renaissance in the twentieth century. Therefore, the powerful repetition in the fourth stanza, " I have known rivers / Ancient dusky rivers"(p.33) narrows down the scope of the poem, shifting the focus from external into internal one, and prepares the reader to the last stanza" My soul has grown deep like the rivers"(p.33). The first person "I" and "river" read the same, except for the physical and the spiritual dimensions. Hughes aims to make white and black folks reimagine black humanity and reconsider them as equal human beings (Miller, 2006).

Hughes's project of constructing the Black Self goes beyond glorifying the race. He moves from constructing the image and the self to the prophetic vision stressed through a confident black voice. The significance of the imagery and symbolism in the previous poems is crystallized with a perfect aesthetic emotion and prophetic vision in "I, Too". Despite the suffering of the black people, Hughes seeks reconciliation by the end, prophesizing a better future for his race.

"I, Too", with its five stanzas and various lengths, the poem echoes Walt Whitman, the father of American Modernist poetry. According to Michlin (2001), Hughes employs the lyrical formula to connect the devoted literature, the black poetic

voice, and the American traditions in the poem. Referring to Whitman, who tried to articulate the poor and middle class of the American population in his famous poem “I Heard American Singing,” listing various division of labors such as mechanics, carpenters, shoemakers, and boatmen. Hughes figures out that Whitman had bleached the United States from the black folk, as the poet excluded black people from the poem (p. 236). Separated line with a perfect economy of the adverb “Too,” the statement in the first stanza is a central to the poem, “I, Too, Sing America”. Thus, Hughes evokes Whitman’s white first person “I,” creating an equivalent black voice for his audience, stating that not only the white folk can sing America, but also black people can do:

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the Kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow stronger. (Hughes, 2015, p. 91).

In the lines above, the speaker exposes the racial discrimination that the black people experienced throughout history until the time the poet writes, since the pronoun “They” in the poem represents all racist subjects of the white folk. Moreover, blending perfectly rage with humor, Hughes highlights his protest in a very delicate way, making the poem acceptable for his white and black readers.

The significant shift in the third stanza makes the poem relevant to the whole project of constructing the Black Self and providing moral and psychological uplifts. After exposing the inferior position of the black people in the United States, the speaker seems to prevail in the next stanza. He, the dark brother, challenges his oppressor on the one hand, and opens up great expectations to the black selves on the other hand. Using the adverb “tomorrow,” Hughes invokes a better future with infinite possibilities for his racial group through confidence and an authoritative black voice. With a powerful verbal expression “dare”, Hughes challenges the racist people, and which in turn, purges the negative energy of his people:

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then. (Hughes, 2015, p. 91).

Hughes ends the stanza with another adverbial expression, "Then," as a bridge to his the next thought, delivering the audience at an emotional shift throughout the poem:

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,— (Hughes, 2015, p. 91).

Pervading theme in most of Hughes's poems, beauty serves as an epiphanic reminder of the race in "I, Too". In the above lines, the speaker shifts from kinetic emotions of rage and challenge to an aesthetic means and purgation, emphasized by a sudden use of dash. The poem closes in another epiphanic shift, as the speaker steps from being part of the American population to being America itself by switching the pronoun "I" to "I am," I, Too, I am America." (p. 91).

3. Conclusion

To conclude, the Black Self had endured years of torment at the hands of white people. Constructed by white scientists, black culture is viewed as inferior to all other cultures in the world. Ironically, the black people themselves believed in such categorization, so within the dark communities the darker is found subjugated. Consequently, many black people attempted to flee their racial group, seeking whiteness as a salvation; the color white became a symbol of all virtues. As Hughes puts it, "The whisper of "I want to be white" runs silently through their minds" (Hughes, 1995, p. 91).

Drawn heavily from the twentieth century black movements like The Harlem Renaissance and Negritude, Hughes's project of constructing the Black Self depends on subverting the language of the oppressor, seeking inner beauty within his people,

and asserting the universality of the black culture. Therefore, he challenges the white society's conceptions and racial codes, making Africa his muse and divine inspiration.

As a black voice, Hughes attempts to make a radical change of all false conceptions about his people. Embracing his dark complexion in "Proem", and asserting his identity and natural beauty in "My People". In addition, "Me and My Song" is built on the assumption that blackness is not always evil; a notion was held by Negritude intellectuals in the early twentieth century. Moreover, "The Negro Speaks of River" stands as a race pride and historicity of the black culture, while "I, Too" asserts that black people are an essential part of the American cultural confluence. In this poem, Hughes visualizes a better future for his people, daring white racists, and explores the aesthetic means of his race.

From the Harlem Renaissance of the early 1920s to the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Hughes's poetry helped to unify people within the African Diaspora. He greatly nurtured subsequent generations. His early writing served as an innovative enhancement to the abilities of his contemporaries, such as the Keatsian poetry of Countee Cullen, the avant-garde and prophetic artistry of Aaron Douglas, and the musical exuberance of Josephine Baker. During his late twenties and early thirties, he influenced writers Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. Subsequently, he inspired third-generation writers, such as Mari Evans and Alice Walker (Miller, 2004).

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